DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 342 035 CS 507 728

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TITLE Policy Implementation: The Virtual Disappearance of an Issue in NDT Debate.
PUB DATE 2 Nov 91
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (77th, Atlanta, GA, October 31-November 3, 1991). "Filled" letters may affect legibility of document.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Citizenship; *Debate; *Educational Objectives; Higher Education; *Outcomes of Education; *Persuasive Discourse; Program Evaluation; *Public Speaking; Skill Development; Student Development
IDENTIFIERS *Debate Theory; Educational Issues; *National Debate Tournament; Policy Implementation

ABSTRACT

Competitive intercollegiate debate programs have long been premised on the unique educational opportunity the activity affords its participants. The central problem with National Debate Tournament (NDT) rounds is that policy advocacy too frequently occurs, reducing questions asked to one of whether advantages outweigh disadvantages. While issues of policy feasibility, workability, and practicality are essential tests of the wisdom of any proposed course of action, such issues rarely, if ever, arise in NDT debate rounds. Avoidance of such questions reflects a mindset that casts doubt on educational objectives typically offered in support of college debate. It is often noted that debate skills have value in various occupational fields; however, NDT debate does not stimulate a real world counterpart. Furthermore, NDT debate practice does not promote citizen participation in policy making. Most arguments popular in the NDT circuit would be laughable in most democratic decision making forums. One justification offered in support of debate is that it teaches argumentation skills. In its preoccupation with one level of argument, NDT policy debate has shrunk the opportunity to develop argumentative skill. Perhaps the educational function of collegiate policy debating would be better served by changing the assumptions underlying NDT debate. (One endnote is included; 34 references are attached.) (SG)

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Policy Implementation: The Virtual Disappearance of an Issue in NDT Debate

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Presented at the Speech Communication Association Convention in Atlanta, Georgia on November 2, 1991

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Policy Implementation: The Virtual Disappearance of an Issue in NDT Debate

Competitive programs in intercollegiate debate have long been premised on the unique educational experience the activity affords its participants. But as those enduring the delights of state-mandated assessment and curriculum review activities will quickly tell you, ephemeral claims about "educational" outcomes fall on deaf ears. Labelling an activity educational viable is easy; convincing others that it is poses a greater challenge typically initiated with a response to the question, "What are the goals of this program?"

A lengthy list of potential educational benefits resulting from debate generally (and the NDT style of it) exists, and time certainly does not permit a review of all of these alleged outcomes. Instead, this essay focuses on three frequently noted educational goals supposedly advanced by participation in policy debate and argues that the drift away from discussion in debate rounds of the practicality and feasibility of specific features of affirmative plans has lead us to the point where our approach to debating policy interferes with these objectives. The central problem, as I see it, is that <u>policy advocacy</u> too frequently occurs in NDT rounds.

The Retreat from Policy Advocacy

While members of the NDT debate community are a diverse lot where disagreement is usually more frequent than agreement, we hopefully do concur that the resolutions created for our students to debate involve matters of public policy. In the most direct sense, issues of public policy concern whatever government chooses to do or not do (Dye, 1975).

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When expressed as a statement for formal debate, policy propositions ". . . focus arguments around specific choices and actions" (Warnick and Inch, 1989, p. 218). In making a claim of policy, the advocate expresses a choice which ". . . prescribes specific behavior" (Moskau, 1990, p. 63) and ". . .makes a forthright suggestion for change" (Reinard, 1991, p. 58).

NDT resolutions are, no doubt, about policy. But debaters are, less and less, advocating policy when they discuss these resolutions. Policy advocacy, in the sense that I use the term here, is defined as ". . . saying what governments ought to do" (Dye, 1975, p. 5). Because the probable wisdom of some future action has become the focus of debate (Lee and Lee, 1990, p. 53), policy advocacy "requires the skills of rhetoric [and] persuasion" (Dye, 1975, p. 5). To advocate policy requires that one offer answers to the typical questions reasonable people are likely to make when confronted with a choice of possible future actions. NDT debate rounds have almost exclusively reduced the set of questions typically asked to one: do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. While this is certainly a pertinent issue whenever policy choices are debated, it is not the only issue. A brief glimpse at writings in rhetoric, argumentation, group decisionmaking, and public policy analysis suggests that questions of policy feasibility, workability, and practicality are essential tests of the wisdom of any proposed future course of action.[1] Yet the issues rarely, if ever, surface in NDT debate rounds.

Nadeau's (1958) investigation of 24 representative treatises on rhetoric covering a span from the fourth century B.C. to the twentieth century revealled that every writer included the question "is it possible" (or "is it easy") as a fundamental issue inherent to the deliberation of policy claims.

The traditional wisdom of assessing a proposal's feasibility is frequently echoed in argumentation texts used in writing and speech courses.

For example, Mayberry and Golden (1990) observe the following about writing an argument to advocate a policy claim:

> To be successful, your recommendation . . . must be feasible. Even the most brilliant recommendation will be rejected if its implementation is fraught with difficulties. While a detailed implementation plan is not required of all recommendations, some indication of the feasibility of your plan will strengthen your argument (p. 123).

Fahnestock and Secor emphasize the importance of the issue of practicality with a hypothetical example of the sorts of preposterous claims writers could make if the requirement to demonstrate feasibility were overlooked. Sadly, something close to their worst-case scenario is acted out numerous times in the typical NDT tournament:

> If you are making a specific proposal, . . . then you must convince [people] 'it can be done." Feasibility means workability, showing your audience that you are not proposing ice palaces in the desert, making your own black hole, or feeding hungry nations with fried earthworms. It is one thing to dream up pie-in-the sky proposals and quite another to argue that they are actually doable" (1990, p. 281-282).

Of course, for "debate traditionalists," these recommendations from our colleagues in English departments are nothing new. Receivers subject policy proposals to "reality checks," and the acceptance of a policy is dependent upon its feasibility (Jensen, 1981, p. 93). As Ehninger and Brockreide remind us (1978), "What cannot be put into effect and enforced

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obviously produces no adequate remedy for any problem. Whether a remedy could be undertaken helps one decide critically whether it should be undertaken" (p. 165). Texts in small group communication routinely remind us that one test of the wisdom of solutions generated as a result of group inquiry is whether or not the solution can be implemented. This is "crucial because, if a proposal cannot be implemented, it is not practical" (Giffin and Patton, 1973, p. 168).

And yet practicality questions are among the least likely to be raised in NDT debate rounds despite the fact that many of the policy proposals advanced are, on their face, suspiciously impractical. Anyone so motivated could produce an intriguing list of dizzyingly fanciful actions which will be implemented by "any and all means necessary." Some of my favorites from recent years are these: mandating a 50 percent reduction in sulfur dioxide emissions from all sources generating them in the United States, to be achieved in a ten-year period; requiring that all electrical plants use magneto hydrodynamics; banning all trade pressure on South Korea; and overruling every privacy decision made by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Many suggestions advocated in NDT debate rounds, while no doubt intriguing, are just not easily "doable." As the policies expressed in affirmative plans have become bolder and more bizarre, the specificity with which those plans are described has decreased and the reluctance of negatives to advance and judges to entertain discussion of feasibility has risen. At the very time when the extremeness of solutions presented by affirmative cases ought to prompt more questions about feasibility, the issue gets very little discussion. Herbeck, Katsulas, and Panetta (1987) have reminded us the folly resulting when negative counterplans advocating a utopian future are excused of the burdens of feasibility and

implementation: such discussions are superficial and educationally suspect because they promote encourage the evaluation of policy in a political vacuum. When the feasibility of an affirmative's plan goes unquestioned, debating occurs in a practical vacuum which is every bit as educationally misleading. Our policy discussions thus become trivial word games instead of realistic attempts to cope with the problems that face our society.

When feasibility questions are ignored, we teach our students a to adopt a false confidence in the power of public policy initiatives. Many social problems resist easy management, and even the most ingenious policies are subject to realistic constraints of resources, technological limitations, gaps in oversight and enforcement, deeply ingrained public beliefs, and so on. Dye (1975) reminds us of the logical difficulties created when practical constraints are overlooked and too much faith is invested in the power of public policy:

> [I]t may be that the *only* way to insure equality of opportunity is to remove children from disadvantaged family backgrounds at a very early age, perhaps before they are six months old. The weight of social science evidence suggests that the potential for achievement may be determined at a very young age. However, a policy of removing children from their family environment at such an early age runs contrary to our deepest feelings about family attachments. The forcible removal of children from their mothers is 'unthinkable' as a government policy (p. 12).

Subjecting policy innovations to a test of practicality necessarily reminds us of the limitations of government action. Almost twenty years ago, Brock, Chesebro, Cragan, and Klumpp (1973) warned about the damage that

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the traditional, rational approach to decisionmaking was doing to competitive debate and they recommended a rejection of the stock issues model of argument in favor of a systems analysis approach which required ". . . that the policy maker be conscious of the unity of our societal system and the need to formulate policy consistent with the values of the overall system" (83). Few NDT debate plans present "policy makers" with proposals that meet this expectation. So, neither the stock issue of desirability nor its heir (policy unity) arises in the typical debate today.

Avoidance of questions of feasibility reflects a NDT debate mindset that does demage some of the educational objectives typically announced when administrators question why their college/university supports a debate team. There is, for me, no more troubling development that the recent celebration of the narrow, insular, and closed system that NDT debate has become. Our lessons are taught to increasingly fewer students who, in the words of one NDT coach, must be ". . . socialized into competitive debate in high school" and will " . . . be prepared to contribute immediately to the squad" (Panetta, 1990, p. 69). NDT debate is increasingly defined (or excused) as a specialized field of argument--specialized to the point where we are now the Marines of the academy: the few, the proud, the NDT debate programs.

As mentioned earlier, the essay will examine only three educational values undermined by the debate process which gives little presumptive weight to matters of feasibility.

Educational Objectives and Policy Debate

Teachers of debate establish closer relationships with students than typically possible in traditional courses, and these encounters often last the

duration of the student's undergraduate education. The intense and time-consuming nature of the activity draws to it highly motivated students, most of whom are intellectually sophisticated if not superior students generally. Long before the faculty-development workshop "industry" discovered the values of close tutoring, cooperative learning between teacher and student, and active learning, intercollegiate debate employed these "innovations" as a natural part of the process of helping students "get ready" for the the next tournament. But what do we hope our students will "get out" of debate?

Preparation for "Later Life"

It is often noted that the skills learned in debate have practical value in a variety of occupational fields. Freeley (1986), for example, contends that debate develops leadership ability and other "essential proficiencies" that are the hallmark of an educated person. He enthusiastically proclaims debaters are able to rise to positions of leadership in business and professional life. For students, the applicability of debate to their future is a significant source of motivation: as one director of debate expressed the point to The Chronicle of Higher Education, students see debate "as a tool that will help them in later life, in their careers" (Ingalls, 1985, p. 13).

For qualifiers to the 1991 National Debate Tournament, this educational mission was summarized in a letter from American Forensic Association President James Pratt appearing on the first page of the tournament booklet:

> [T]he most significant value of the National Debate Tournament is educational. The American Forensic Association's members

> are forensic educators; the judges at this tournament render decisions but also teach; the debaters display their academic skills. Educational and vocational testimonials from former debaters are virtually universal; 'debate was the most valuable part of my college education. Regardless of one's profession, debate experience helps. What business proposal can't be viewed as a first affirmative constructive? What criminal trial or university committee meeting can't benefit from probing cross-examination? What employment interview or sales solicitation doesn't warrant a careful evaluation of the evidence presented to support claims (1991, p. 1)?

Our "non-debate" faculty colleagues, and more than a few of those who have recently judged an NDT round, might have difficulty accepting this "real world analogy" with a straight face. While NDT debaters no doubt learn many things in the course of their careers, it is arguable whether or not many of these lessons easily transfer to life after the last "new right" spewfest.

The typical view of the career utility of debate results from a reasoning process in which one looks backwards from real-world communication tasks to the debate model in search connections between those tasks and ideally conceived of and practiced debate skills. Consider what happens when we reverse the direction of Pratt's reasoning: what first affirmative speech delivered at any NDT-style tournament would be viewed as a good business proposal? What trial or university committee would benefit from probing cross-examinations like "What's your fourteen off of my twelve on the socialism saves the environment thing." Does the habit of taking easy refuge in the biased testimony of extremist flamers

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portend the ability to carefully scrutinize employment interview responses or claims in sales solicitations?

If our rhetoric about the occupational values of debating is to have any meaning to audiences other than ourselves, serious reexamination of the assumptions of NDT debate are in order. We typically excuse many of our communication practices with the caveat that our students can learn to "adapt" just fine: debate need not mirror the real world for its lessons to be transferable. For the most part, claims like these are supported anecdotally. And for each example of a debater who did well in a public debate, there's a contrary case of the person who subjected a philosophy class to an oral report on Foucault's "repressive hypothesis" blithered at break-neck spead complete with oral outline signposts.

But the retreat to a rhetoric of adaptability as a defense of the occupational relevance of the style of debate taught by NDT participation suggests that the product as presently packaged really does not have application to "later life." The face validity of our claims about occupational relevance is thus suspect: NDT debate does not simulate a real world counterpart; to have face validity, an educational experience ought not be "wholly foreign to one's life experience" (Ruben and Lederman, 1982, p. 237). And NDT debate is, unless (as was noted earlier) one is "socialized into it" in high school. Once the debaters career ends, the process of socialization will have to begin again--unless one takes pleasure in not "fitting in."

If we are serious about preparing students for later life, a variety of NDT debate practices will have to change. Admitting that questions of policy feasibility are important, while not a cure for NDT debate's uncomfortable fit to the real world, at least begins to refocus our attention

on the task of keeping touch with the practical relevance of the argumentative strategies we encourage our students to develop.

Citizen Participation in Policy Making

"Often, debate is promoted as an activity for training citizens for service in a democratic society" (Thomas, 1991, p. 83). This position rests on the assumption that debate competition is a laboratory for the development of effective skills in critical thinking and active participation. Through argument, societies can approach change without the resort to force (Ziegelmueller and Dause, 1975, p. 6). Debate teaches citizens methods of rational participation useful democratic governance and is, as a result, socially useful.

NDT debate practices resemble little that the future "citizen orator" might usefully apply in the democratic marketplace. Divorced of the expectation that policy proposals be feasible and realistic, debaters argue from absurd premises to extreme conclusions. Lost in the modern world of NDT debate is the notion that receivers do not passively ingest discourse. Audiences are, as we learn from researchers in persuasion, active agents in the process of reacting to communication (Smith, 1982, p. 218). But NDT debate often operates on the assumption that judges check their predispositions at the door--especially those that might question whether the arguments presented would stand up to common sense and the scrutiny of reasonable people (Wood, 1991, p. 51-52).

Most of the arguments popular on the NDT circuit would be laughable if presented in most democratic decisionmaking forums. Herbeck and Leeper summarize a few of the incredible positions that have become commonplace on the circuit:

> Judges are expected to put any and all of their prior knowledge and preconceptions aside and to merely process the arguments as delivered. This phenomenon has resulted in garbled debates which bear little resemblance to real-world decisionmaking situations. We are supposed to be persuaded that nuclear war is good, anarchy is a workable form of government, and a whole host of other unusual, inconsistent and, perhaps to some, inconceivable positions" (1991, p. 25).

Of course, this list is a mere sketch of an argumentative world where depressions are good, totalitarian regimes protect the environment, a change to a feminist mindset is about to happen, and saving lives will result in nuclear war.

This retreat from reality, of course, is facilitated by the lack of a requirement that policy proposals be demonstrated to be feasible. How can debate claim to prepare students to participate in a democracy if the arguments debaters learn have little use outside the contest environment? "If we assume that the quality of decision-making in our society still rests to a significant degree on the quality of the human dialogue that underlies it, then it is important to attract and train our best minds as participant leaders in that dialogue" (Wood, 1991, p. 55).

While some might be tempted to claim that the importance of the citizen orator as an educational rationale for competitive debate died with Isocrates, some who have never paid NDT dues are expressing a view that higher education in America must reform itself so that students become more, not less, involved in public dialogue about social problems and their solutions. A recent "Point of View" article in The Chronicle of Higher

Education contended that "we ought to be cultivating in our students the perspectives and practices that will enable them to practice social and political criticism in their daily lives" (Kaye, 1991, p. A40). The goal of this reformation of higher education would be the development of ". . .citizens not only capable of choosing among the alternatives provided by civic and political leaders, but also themselves capable of formulating alternative choices" (Kaye, 1991, p. A40). Sounds strangely like a section from the introductory chapter of an old debate text!

NDT debate could fill such role, and could use the objective of helping to develop the next generation of "public intellectuals" as a sound educational rational for debate programs. We cannot, however, make such a case when our activity is burdened with hysterical arguing about a variety of counter-intuitive and publicly indefensible positions. While we were rejoicing in our self-proclaimed status as a field of argument, others were beating us with a position that we ought to have staked out for ourselves: face-to-face debate is a central part of the public business of a democracy, and college debating programs can help future citizens and leaders develop those skills.

Learning Skills in Argument

"One of the strongest justifications for debate is that it serves as a laboratory for teaching argumentation skills" (Herbeck and Leeper, 1991, p. 23). Debating emphasizes critical thinking and the application of reasoning to the task of constructing persuasive claims. Among the justifications of the particular educational value of policy debating is the claim that policy topics entail a greater number of issues than do topics of value or fact

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(Henderson, 1991). Hence, policy debate, because of its complexity, offers the most intensified laboratory experience in argumentative skill development.

While there's no room for doubt that the arguments "on the circuit" these days are often painfully complicated, our approach to policy advocacy has shrunk the opportunity to develop argumentative skill. As Rowland and Deathridge (1988) have observed, NDT debating emphasizes an exchange of claims and counterclaims at the expense of analysis of the warrants authorizing those contentions or assessment of the credibility of the data advanced in support of them. Such a preoccupation with one level of argument development necessarily limits a debater's learning about the breadth of approaches for advancing and criticizing arguments (Wood, 1991). Thus, the NDT style of debate fails to fully educate students in the process of argument because its model of an ideal argument is too restrictive and out of step with the way that people argue in a variety of contexts. We have, in short, emphasize the field variant traits of modern NDT debate at the expense of the field invariant characteristics of positions likely to be generally evaluated as "good reasons."

One expectation of general argument development that has gone by the boards, of course, is the requirement that advocates of change specify what their policy is. Thanks to the hypothesis-testing paradigm of debate, policy specifics were assumed to be less important than the "core elements" of the change embodied in the resolution (Ulrich, 1984). But even advocates of the paradigm realized that avoidance of questions of practicality was not always defensible. Patterson and Zarefsky (1982), for example, noted that academic debate resolutions are broadly conceived and articulated in abstract language. To make them meaningful, affirmative teams had to provide some detail about the nature of the policy being

proposed. Providing these details improved clash and helped clarify the central focus of the resolution because "it may be inconvenient to examine the basic ideas behind a resolution without having some specific form in which to embody them" (Patterson and Zarefsky, 1982, p. 143). Despite this warning, NDT debate has drifted away from the explication of specific plan features and toward a language of ritual incantation that excuses debaters from defending the feasibility of implementing any policy mandates announced. A comparison of the detail of plans in NDT final rounds of recent years with those of ten (and twenty!) years ago makes clear just how reductive the approach to plan development has become.

A complete argument, as our textbooks remind us, includes a claim, data, and a warrant. When a policy is outlined, explanation of its feasibility constitutes (in part) a warrant that the proposal is a reasonable idea. When advocates are excused from the duty to defend the practicality of the proposals they advance, they are learning an argumentative lesson which has little applicability beyond the competitive world. After all, real-world decision makers are likely to inquire about whether or not a proposed policy is "doable."

Conclusion

At the very time when teachers in other disciplines are discovering what we knew all along, that debating is an excellent approach for increasing student motivation and learning (Combs and Bourne, 1989; Moeller, 1985), NDT debate is having the reverse educational effect. Over ten years ago, Kovalcheck (1979, p. 31) warned us about the declining number of student participants and the shrinking size of debate tournaments while Howe (1979) noted a flight from NDT debate (p. 15-17). More recently, Dempsey and Hartman (1986) observed that the exodus

from policy debate activities was continuing (p. 170). Rowland and Deatherage (1988, p. 246) gravely concluded that "at both the regional and national levels, NDT debate is very sick, perhaps dying."

And the patient's condition worsens. The number of NDT subscribers dwindles, the list of schools earning points in the NDT national rankings grows shorter, and almost every team applying for a second-round at-large bid to the 1991 NDT got one. If "NDT debate" was a course offering at a mythical college, the dean would certainly note these figures with alarm and wonder if the program was any longer a viable component of the institution's educational mission. We have seen the results of a model of debate which pursued the narrow objectives of teaching a radically specialized form of argument. Perhaps the educational function of collegiate policy debating would be better served by changing the assumptions underlying NDT debate. Could the results of such an experiment be that much worse?

NOTES

[1]I am using feasibility in the general sense of the requirement that the affirmative demonstrate that its plan is a workable policy, not that the affirmative would have to prove it was feasible that real world decision makers would vote to implement the policy. In other words, assuming that the political will could be mustered to adopt the plan, has the affirmative (or the negative in its counterplan) shown that the policy is a feasible alternative with potential for successful operation one put in place. Obviously, practicality questions are of greater importance on some resolutions and less of an issue on others.

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